

Tribal school strives to save Indian identity

'Numma tush sunweka toonk toonk sunwit; sunwekatush nuksh tumnakey.'
'We speak many languages; we speak as one.'

By JANE GARGAS
 Of the Herald-Republic

TOPPENISH — When Cecelia Eli remembers her early schooling in the 1940s, it conjures up visions of the dark broom closet in her boarding school where she was banished whenever she uttered a word of the Yakima Indian language.

She hasn't forgotten the meals of bread and water, also given in punishment for the infraction of speaking her native dialect.

She can still picture the starkness, the impersonal authority, the military uniforms and, most of all, the attempt to make her less Indian.

Because she remembers, Eli is working to make sure it never happens again.

Eli, a language and cultural specialist at the Yakima Tribal School in the Stanley Smartlowit Education Center, feels strongly that children should have positive educational experiences and not be left with the negative feelings she had toward schooling by the time she graduated from high school.

"Many elders of the tribe still view school as a punishment because it was for them," she said. "The educational system was a great failure for many members of my generation."

She has equally intense emotions about preserving her tribe's native

tongue, the language of the Yakima Indian Nation.

She sees education and ethnic language as intertwined, one not easily separated from the other.

"If we don't teach our original language to our children, it will die. And with it will go our culture. We'll become the last of our species.

"When you lose your language, you lose your identity as an Indian; you don't know who you are."

Retaining that tradition is part of her job at the tribal center for preschool and alternative junior and high school programs. She works closely with Patsy Martin, who, as superintendent of the Yakima Tribal School, oversees 135 children in Head Start and 70 students in grades seven through 12.

Concurring with Eli that a sense of self-esteem is crucial in education, Martin said, "One of the big strengths of our school, whether we're talking about 4-year-olds or 17-year-olds, is that we teach who we are."

Both women believe that the public schools on the reservation are not adequately addressing the unique needs of Indian children.

"One of the reasons we have 70 students in the upper grades at the tribal school is that they met with



problems in the public schools," asserted Martin.

"Our children leave our preschool, eager to accept a new challenge in kindergarten. But, somewhere in there, something happens that turns them away. It's sad, but I've heard people say that after about third grade, the smiles on the faces of the tribal kids have disappeared."

The educational needs of Indian children differ from those of other cultures, according to Eli.

"Many of our traditions are misunderstood by non-Indians. We expect our children to take part in

certain formalities, such as and feasts, which means they miss some school. But teachers don't understand that, which makes it harder for the children to catch up. We don't view it as failing school; we see it as following traditions of our people."

Both Martin and Eli feel an obligation of school personnel to determine what's going on in a student's life.

"We need to know what is going through at home. A child with drug problems in his family, living away from his parents

A prescription for improved Indian education

TOPPENISH — Ask Yakima Indian Nation educators Cecelia Eli and Patsy Martin what they would do to improve education for Native American children, and they are quick, and eager, to answer.

- First, and foremost, they view multicultural awareness as a vital component of public school curriculum, from kindergarten through 12th grade. They believe the concept of pride in ethnicity needs to be reinforced year after year, for all groups. As an example, they give high marks to the Cultural Unity Fair given each spring at Wapato Junior High School, where every student participates.

- Coupled with cultural awareness, the two women recommend in-service training in cultural differences for all personnel in reservation school districts. "Schools have an obligation to provide multicultural training to all employees, not just teachers. It's also vital to include secretaries, aides and bus drivers," says Martin.

- When parents express ethnic concerns, school administrators should listen with "open ears and hearts. No artificial listening," says Martin.

- More ethnic counselors need to be hired at all school levels, according to the two women.

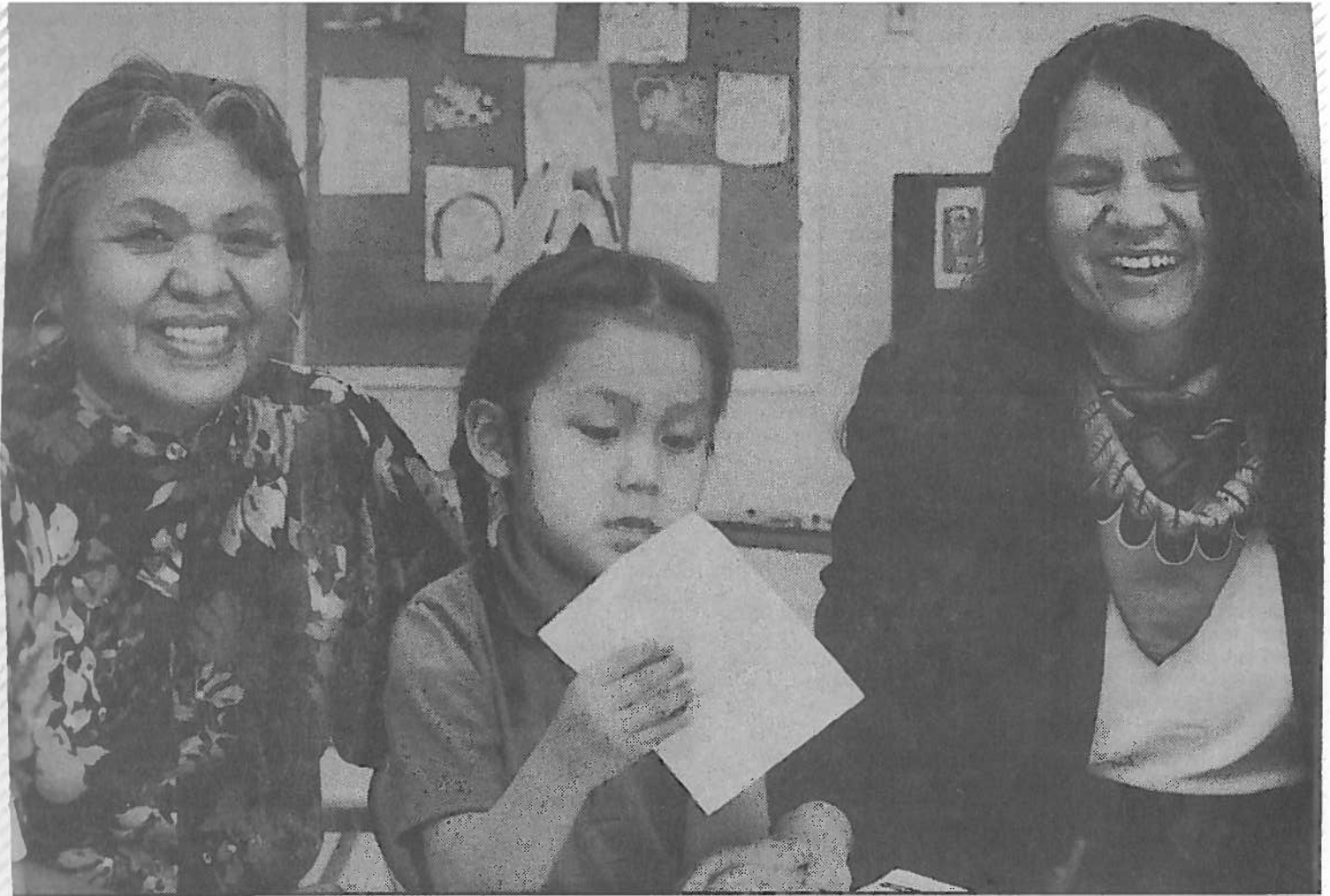
- They would like to see the Yakima Indian language introduced in public schools. "Most Indian families here have indicated that they believe their language should be taught in school," explains Eli. "We fear the loss of our culture if we don't retain what we have. In the last few years there has been a renewed interest in our language; it's related to the desire to keep our spirituality." She is encouraged by the fact that Yakima Indian language concepts have been introduced in schools in both Granger and White Swan.

- Open dialogue between various school districts and the tribe is an essential ingredient in continued educational progress, the two

women point out. Martin says she takes the direction taken in meetings begun this year between members of the Tribal Education Committee and administrators from the six public school districts on the reservation. She describes the monthly meetings as devoted to discussing concerns and hopes for tribal children.

- They say more programs should be developed to address the needs of children who experience problems. Martin hopes that other school districts will follow the lead of the Topp elementary schools with its Primary Intervention and Day Treatment programs, which help in the area of mental health. "The programs are sensitive to the needs of our children," she said.

- The two women feel their suggestions for improvements in ethnic education are essential. "All children need love. It's as simple as that," concludes Martin.



(Staff photo)

Yakima Tribal School educators Cecelia Eli, left, and Patsy Martin visit 5-year-old Archie Wapsheli Jr., working on an art project.

simply cubbyholed and responded to in one way, then we aren't being sensitive to his outside life," said Martin.

She indicated that Indian children are frequently taught differently at home than they are at school. Native American families tend to reinforce group cooperation and solving problems together. In school, that approach clashes with the concept of competition, she said.

Both women stressed that there are other ethnic groups living on the reservation with unique educational needs.

Eli pointed out, "We have Hispanics, Asians, blacks — the schools need to be working with all of us together."

Martin added, "When school personnel don't expect minorities to excel, they won't."

She explained, "Sensitivity to the uniqueness of people should be fostered at all levels. The first school employee a child usually meets each day is the bus driver; what a difference it makes if he or she greets all children with a smile and with sensitivity. Children from all cultures need that.

"First impressions are very important. We all need to be treated cordially and greeted with respect."

Both Martin and Eli feel that it's vital for as many public school employees as possible to come from the local community. "We need our people staying and working in the community. How many outsiders really understand or have the unique background to be positive for all kinds of kids?" Martin asked.

"There are some people, no matter

where they grow up, who have the attitudes, values and knowledge that make them skillful in dealing with all types of people. They have warmth, and children can sense that."

She indicated that one of her goals as an educational administrator is to develop and train teachers for eventual employment in the public school system.

"We gladly, and reluctantly, send our teachers on. It's hard to lose a good teacher, but it's important to have our people influencing large numbers of children, too."

The women also share a catholic approach to education on the reservation. Said Martin, "The six school districts on the reservation tend to deal with just their populations, in their own territories. But the Yakimas take a more global view of the area; whatever affects the children in White Swan also affects those in Wapato.

"This whole area of Central Washington is our home. It would be beneficial if school officials realized that the tribe isn't segregated by communities."

Although Eli says that there is a world of difference in present-day education from what she experienced, she also fears that there's a hangover of low expectations for Native American achievement.

"Our teachers at the tribal school are affectionate and caring and know the history of our community and the families. And, most importantly, they have dreams and aspirations for our children. We're looking forward to the time when we can say that about all teachers in all schools."